



File Code: 1900; 2710
Date: June 1, 2016

Greetings:

The U.S. Forest Service, Black Hills National Forest (Forest Service) is evaluating a proposal by the State of South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks to construct, operate, and maintain a non-motorized trail across lands managed by the Black Hills National Forest. The proposed Rushmore Connector Trail would connect the George S. Mickelson Trail near Hill City, South Dakota to the Mount Rushmore National Memorial. At this time the Forest Service seeks public comment on this proposal.

Under terms of the National Environmental Policy Act, the Forest Service is the lead agency for this analysis. The National Park Service-Mount Rushmore National Memorial and the Federal Highway Administration are cooperating agencies. An environmental impact statement (EIS) will be developed to document the analysis and disclose effects of the proposal to the public and the decision makers. Enclosed you will find a document with more information about the project, and a map showing the proposed trail route.

We request your review and comment on this proposal, to help us determine the scope and issues to be analyzed in the EIS. Comments concerning the proposed action, including environmental concerns and suggested alternatives, will be accepted from the public; local, state and Federal agencies; Tribes; and other interested parties. Comments should be submitted within 30 calendar days of the notification date in the Federal Register, expected on or about June 6. Please submit comments to: Forest Supervisor, Black Hills National Forest, ATTN: Rushmore Connector Trail, 1019 N. 5th Street, Custer, SD 57730. Comments may be submitted electronically to: *comments-rocky-mountain-black-hills@fs.fed.us*, with "Rushmore Connector Trail" in the subject line. Electronic comments must be submitted in Word (.doc), Rich Text (.rtf), or Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) format.

Open-house-style public meetings are planned, one each in Hill City and Rapid City, South Dakota, on Tuesday, June 14, and Thursday, June 16. Times and exact locations of these meetings will be announced on the Black Hills National Forest project website, <http://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=44935>. We encourage you to keep informed through this website, which will be updated as the EIS is developed. More information is also available at the website of the consultant who will assist the Forest Service in preparing the analysis, HDR Inc., at www.rushmoreconnectortrail.com.



Questions regarding the Rushmore Connector Trail or the Forest Service's action should be directed to Anne Apodaca, Forest Recreation and Trails Program Manager, Black Hills National Forest Supervisor's Office in Custer, SD, phone 605-673-9239, or by email to aapodaca@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jim Zornes".

JIM ZORNES
Acting Forest Supervisor

Enclosures: Further information and map of proposed route

Cc: Edward Fischer, Anne Apodaca, Kelly Honors

RUSHMORE CONNECTOR TRAIL PROPOSAL

PURPOSE AND NEED

Background

The U.S. Forest Service, Black Hills National Forest (Forest Service) has received a special use permit application from the State of South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (SDGFP) to construct, operate, and maintain a non-motorized trail connecting the George S. Mickelson Trail to Mount Rushmore National Memorial (the Memorial) near Hill City, South Dakota. SDGFP expressed a desire to provide and encourage recreational opportunities for non-motorized users by safely connecting the Mickelson Trail to the Memorial. The trail would run across National Forest System (NFS) lands managed by the Black Hills National Forest; and National Park Service (NPS) lands managed by the Memorial. In addition, the trail would cross a short segment of private land, requiring an easement to be obtained by the proponent at their expense in the name of the U.S. Government.

Under terms of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Forest Service is the lead agency for this analysis. The NPS-Mount Rushmore National Memorial and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) are cooperating agencies. An environmental impact statement (EIS) will be developed to document the analysis and disclose effects of the proposal to the public and the decision makers. The following section describes the actions proposed by the Forest Service and NPS on their respective lands; the underlying reasons for the proposal; and the decisions each agency must make, based on the environmental analysis to be conducted.

Forest Service

For the Forest Service, the purpose of this project is to respond to the application submitted by the SDGFP. The need is to evaluate the application from the SDGFP to construct, operate, and maintain a non-motorized recreation trail and associated corridor across NFS lands managed by the Black Hills National Forest, in order to determine effects as well as consistency with law, regulation, policy, and guidance of the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Black Hills National Forest, as Amended (Forest Plan).

This proposal would respond to the following goals and objectives in the Forest Plan:

- **Goal 4** – Provide for scenic quality, a range of recreational opportunities, and protection of heritage resources in response to the needs of the Black Hills National Forest visitors and local communities.
 - **Objective 412** – Eliminate design barriers that prevent some groups such as the elderly and disabled from recreating in the National Forest.
 - **Objective 417** – Coordinate trail development with the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Develop trail facilities in cooperation with other agencies and partners.
- **Goal 7** – Emphasize cooperation with individuals, organizations, and other agencies while coordinating planning and project implementation.
 - **Objective 701** – Continue to cooperate with interested parties and organizations in the development of plans and projects.

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- **Objective 702** – Encourage cost sharing as part of cooperative efforts.
- **Objective 703** – Seek partnerships with other service providers – federal, state, county, local, and private sector – to define complementary roles that best meet customer needs.
- **Goal 8** – Promote rural development opportunities.
 - **Objective 803** – Recognize the nature and extent of local economic dependencies on National Forest activities. Give special attention to resource programs that help diversify rural economies

National Park Service

Mount Rushmore National Memorial has been asked to participate in the development of the proposed trail connecting the Mickelson Trail from Hill City, South Dakota to the Memorial. The Memorial is responding to the request for a proposed right-of-way permit from the SDGFP that would allow the trail connector to be constructed on NPS lands. The Memorial will use the analysis in the EIS to determine the appropriateness of the trail.

The segment of the proposed connector trail into the Memorial would be approximately 1.4 miles of the estimated 15 to 17 total proposed miles of trail. For the NPS, the purpose of this analysis is to respond to the application submitted by SDGFP. This analysis is needed to determine whether the SDGFP's proposal is in accordance with previous strategic planning guidance including the Memorial's 1980 General Management Plan (GMP). The Memorial's GMP guides management of the parks natural area.

The proposed trail lies adjacent to the management zone designated as "Backcountry" and the GMP directs the lands within this natural zone "be managed to ensure that resources and processes remain largely unaltered by human activity." It also states, "Developments will either be absent or limited to dispersed recreational and management facilities that are essential for management, use, and appreciation of natural resources." Therefore, the SDGFP proposal needs to be thoroughly evaluated through the EIS process.

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PROPOSED ACTION

Overview

The proposed Rushmore Connector Trail, would be constructed, operated, and maintained for non-motorized use. The proposal is based on the special use permit application and the *George S. Mickelson Trail to Mt. Rushmore National Memorial Trail Feasibility Study*, completed previously and provided by the SDGFP to the Forest Service. New trail construction would extend approximately 14 miles across NFS lands and approximately 1.4 miles within the Memorial. The new trail is anticipated to be a combination of compacted tread and elevated walkway, with a trail tread width of approximately eight feet within a corridor approximately twenty feet wide. The trail would be designed to follow the Forest Service Trail Accessibility Guidelines and have grades no greater than 8-14 percent, depending on the resting interval. A right-of-way across private property would be required for a small segment of trail, approximately 0.1 miles. The proponent would secure this right-of-way at their expense, in the name of the U.S. Government.

The Rushmore Connector Trail would connect the existing Forest Service developed recreation facilities along the Peter Norbeck Scenic Byway (SD Highway 244), which it would cross at least three times. The Big Pine Trailhead would be relocated to the south side of the highway to improve trail user safety, and would provide the point for divergence of user groups. Equestrian users would be required to follow the existing Centennial National Recreation Trail (Trail 89) south for approximately 4.8 miles, of which 4.1 miles is located in the Black Elk Wilderness managed by the Forest Service. Existing management direction including party size limits would apply. Within the Memorial, 0.7 miles of the existing Blackberry Trail would be utilized. Bicyclists would travel from Big Pine Trailhead on the proposed designated route, through the Horsethief Lake and Wrinkled Rock areas into the Memorial. Hikers could use either route. See Table 1 for more information.

Table 1 – Trail Mileage, Constructed and Existing

Estimated New Trail Mileage	
Forest Service, by Management Area (MA)	Estimated Mileage
MA 5.1- Resource Production Emphasis	9.3 Miles (includes 0.1 mile easement across private land)
MA 4.2B- Peter Norbeck Scenic Byway (Section within the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve)	3.5 Miles
MA 5.4A- Norbeck Wildlife Preserve	1.3 Miles
National Park Service Lands	
Adjacent to SD Highway 244 Corridor	1.4 Miles
TOTAL (figures are rounded)	15.5 Miles
Estimated Existing Trail Mileage	
Forest Service	Estimated Mileage
MA 1.1A – Black Elk Wilderness, Centennial Trail	4.1 Miles
National Park Service Lands	
Blackberry Trail	0.7 Miles
TOTAL (figures are rounded)	4.8 Miles

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Forest Service

The Forest Service proposes to issue authorizations for the construction, operation, and maintenance of the Rushmore Connector Trail as described above. In addition, these specific connected actions are proposed:

- Construction of a new campground in Section 33 or thereabouts, of Township 1 South, Range 5 East to accommodate trail users and other Forest visitors including equestrian users.
- Reconstruction of the SD Highway 244 underpass near the Willow Creek and Palmer Gulch Campgrounds to facilitate use of the Rushmore Connector Trail with the existing Black Elk Wilderness and Norbeck Wildlife Preserve trail system. An underpass/wildlife crossing will be considered in this area.
- Up to three trail crossings of SD Highway 244 would be analyzed on the NFS portion, to provide safe use of the trail. Both underpass and crossing-at-grade configurations would be considered as appropriate.
- Right-of-way acquisition of approximately 0.1 mile across private land, to be secured by the proponent at their expense in the name of the U.S. Government.
- Reconstruct portions of the Centennial Trail on NFS lands, including sections in the Black Elk Wilderness, to address and mitigate use impacts.

The following analysis would be conducted and included in the EIS:

- The potential for additional trailhead facilities north and west of the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve to provide additional access points to the Rushmore Connector Trail.
- The potential for special recreation events, each with the potential of up to 300 participants, consistent with Forest Plan direction for the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve and Black Elk Wilderness.
- The potential for additional Outfitter-Guide permit requests.
- The implementation of use fees and installation of fee kiosks.

Proposed Authorizations

If an action alternative were selected based on the analysis in the EIS, actions and authorizations would be needed from the Forest Service, NPS, and FHWA. Forest Service actions would include site-specific amendments to the Forest Plan (see below), and authorization under a special use permit. Specifically, the land beneath the trail would remain NFS lands managed by the Black Hills National Forest. The trail facility itself would be constructed, operated, and maintained by the SDGFP, under a special use permit issued under authority of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). The special use permit would allow the SDGFP to charge for use of the trail, as part of the general use fee for the Mickelson Trail. Any other fees proposed by the SDGFP to be implemented for portions of the proposed trail would require prior Forest Service approval with public involvement. Individual special events proposed on the trail would each require Forest Service approval with public involvement, and a separate special use permit.

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Proposed Site-Specific Amendments to the Forest Plan

Preliminary review of the proposed action by agency resource specialists indicated that a site-specific amendment to the Forest Plan would be required to allow for the issuance of an authorization and construction, operation, and maintenance of the Rushmore Connector Trail. In addition, a site-specific amendment would be required for the issuance of additional outfitter-guide permits in the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve. The proposed amendments are described below:

Management Area 5.4A (Norbeck Wildlife Preserve)

- *Forest Plan Standard 5.4A-5103.* Norbeck Wildlife Preserve was established by Congress in 1920 for the "protection of game animals and birds and to be recognized as a breeding place therefor." Although it does not prohibit other uses, the law leaves little doubt: Norbeck is to be managed for the benefit of wildlife. The proposed action is not consistent with Forest Plan Standard 5.4A-5103, which states: "Do not expand the recreational trail system; relocate trail segments to correct or prevent environmental damage."
- *Forest Plan Standard 5.4A-8501.* The proposed action may not be consistent with Forest Plan Standard 5.4A-8501, which states: "Authorize land occupancies only if they are compatible with wildlife needs."
- *Forest Plan Standard 5.4A-8503.* The proposed action may not be consistent with Forest Plan Standard 5.4A-8503, which states: "The three outfitter-guide permits for horseback riding existing in July, 1989, may continue as long as the terms of the permits are met and resources can be protected. Do not expand existing permits or allow new outfitter-guide permits for any activities."

Management Area 1.1A (Black Elk Wilderness)

- *Forest Plan Standard 1.1A-5104.* The Black Elk Wilderness is located within the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve and legislation for this area states that the provisions of the Norbeck Organic Act "shall also apply to the Black Elk Wilderness to the extent that they are not inconsistent with the provisions of the Wilderness Act." The proposed action may not be consistent with Forest Plan Standard 1.1A-5104 which states: "Maximum party size in Wilderness is 25 (any combination of people and recreation stock). This size limit will apply yearlong. Smaller party-size limits for people and stock will be established where biological and physical resource capabilities cannot support that level of use."

The effects analysis in the EIS may identify other specific changes to Forest Plan direction which would be needed to permit this proposal to be implemented.

National Park Service

Once at the Big Pine trailhead on NFS lands, eastbound equestrian users would be diverted south across NFS lands on the existing Centennial Trail, to the Blackberry Trail on NPS lands. The Blackberry Trail would be rehabilitated to safely accommodate horses and riders. Bicycle access is not proposed for either the Blackberry Trail or the Centennial Trail. For bicyclists eastbound from the Big Pine trailhead, the primary access to NPS lands would be along the proposed trail route that enters the Memorial from the Wrinkled Rock Climbing Area to the adjacent NPS Climbing Area. Horses would not be permitted on this section of the trail. Hikers could use

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either route. On NPS lands, the Rushmore Connector Trail would then cross Highway 244 at either an underpass or a crossing at-grade to the western edge of the highway, and would terminate at the trailhead for the Blackberry Trail. This section of the Rushmore Connector Trail would run along the outside (south and west) edge of Highway 244, and would be designed as an alternating assemblage of elevated boardwalk and standard trail with retaining walls as needed. The final design and layout would be dependent upon terrain.

NPS would require approval through a Partner Design and Construction Agreement for the portions of trail construction within the Memorial. Additionally, NPS would require a special regulation to authorize construction of new trails for bicycle use outside developed areas (36 CFR Part 4.30). The NPS would ensure the trail project meets NPS standards and requirements.

SDGFP would donate the completed trail section on NPS lands to the National Park Service. This donation would be made by the SDGFP on its own volition and without compensation. Funding of the portion of the trail within the Memorial would occur under a fundraising agreement to include an endowment for operations and maintenance of the trail in perpetuity. Any special events would also require a special use permit from NPS.

There are no plans to construct additional trailhead or parking facilities at the Memorial terminus of the proposed Rushmore Connector Trail. In addition, no crossing area is proposed for use by pedestrians, bicyclists, or equestrians from the Blackberry Trail across Highway 244 to the Memorial.

Federal Highway Administration

FHWA may provide assistance in funding the Rushmore Connector Trail. Funding for the trail would go through the Federal Highway Trust Fund's Recreational Trails Program. This program provides funds to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities.

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DECISION FRAMEWORK AND RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL

Forest Service

Based on the environmental analysis, the Forest Supervisor of the Black Hills National Forest will make the following decisions, to be documented in a Record of Decision (ROD) to be issued by the Forest Service:

- Whether to authorize construction, operation, and maintenance of approximately 14 miles of non-motorized trail connecting the George S. Mickelson Trail to Mount Rushmore National Memorial near Hill City, South Dakota, as proposed, in some other manner and/or along an alternate route, or not at all;
- What if any design criteria, mitigation measures, and monitoring requirements should be required;
- Whether to amend existing Black Hills National Forest Plan direction to allow implementation of the selected alternative;
- Whether to authorize construction of a new campground in Section 33 or thereabouts, of Township 1 South, Range 5 East, to accommodate trail users and other Forest visitors;
- Whether to authorize reconstruction of the Highway 244 underpass near Willow Creek Campground and Palmer Gulch Campground, to facilitate use of the Rushmore Connector Trail with the existing Black Elk Wilderness and Norbeck Wildlife Preserve trail system;
- Whether to authorize construction of additional trailhead facilities north and west of the Norbeck Wildlife Preserve to provide additional access points to the Rushmore Connector Trail;
- Whether to reconstruct portions of the Centennial Trail, including sections in the Black Elk Wilderness, to address and mitigate use impacts;
- Whether to approve, in principle only, future special events within the capacity analyzed;
- Whether use limits should be imposed on trail use for segments outside of the Black Elk Wilderness;
- Whether to authorize additional outfitter-guide permits;
- Whether to authorize the implementation of use fees;
- Whether to authorize phased construction of the Rushmore Connector Trail on NFS lands prior to potential final rulemaking procedures for actions within Mount Rushmore National Memorial.

Some of these decisions may be reserved to the Regional Forester of the Rocky Mountain Region of the Forest Service. The level of individual decisions will be determined by the actions outlined through the NEPA process.

If any action alternative is selected, project implementation could begin in the year 2018. The initial focus would be to issue authorizations and engineering design and layout.

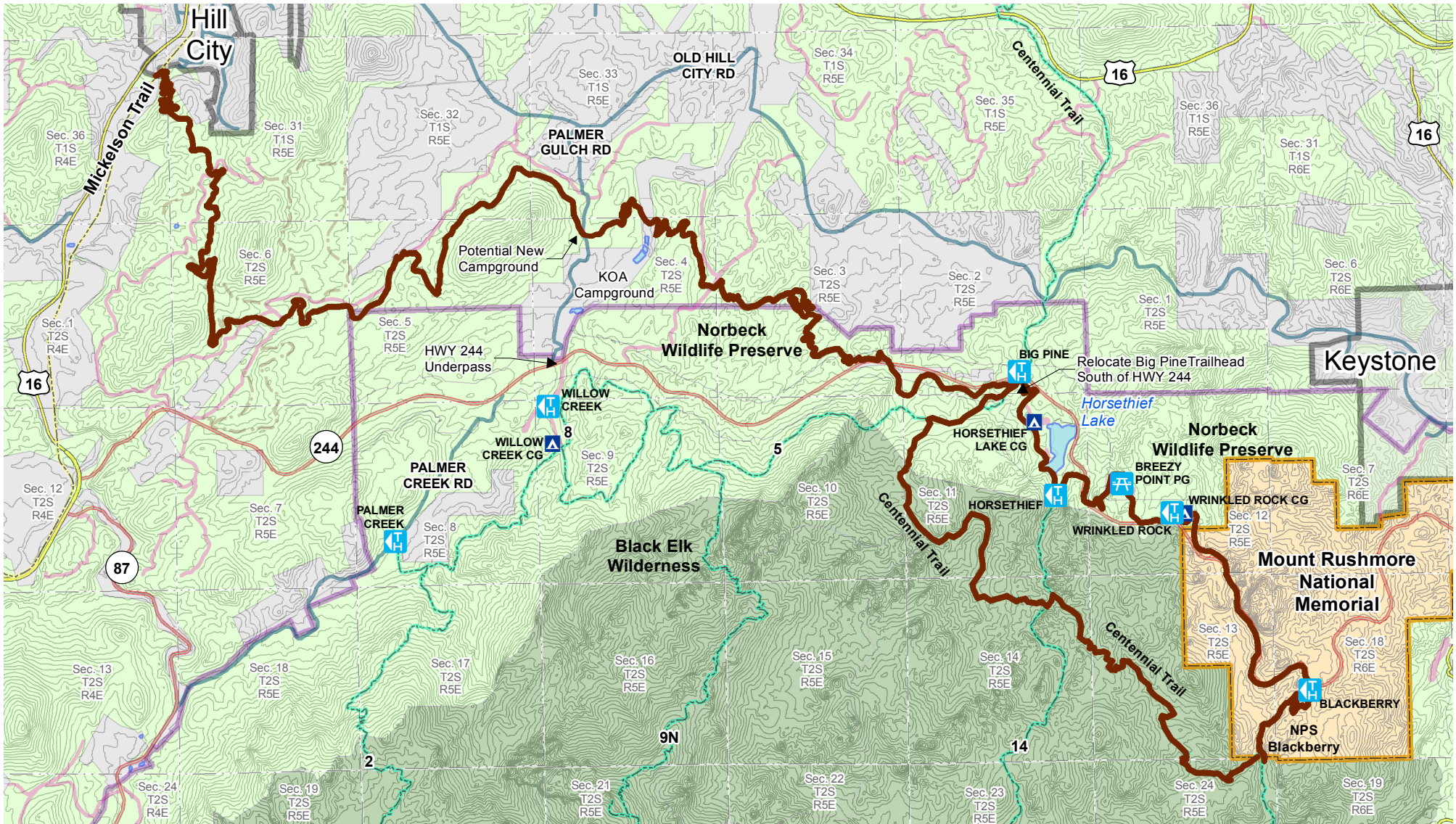
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National Park Service

Based on the analysis in the EIS, the Superintendent of Mount Rushmore National Memorial will make the following decisions, to be documented in a ROD issued by the NPS:

- Whether the authorization of the trail extension onto NPS lands constitutes an acceptable use, not resulting in unacceptable impacts, as defined by *Management Policies 2006* (Section 1.4.3.1);
- Whether to promulgate a special regulation to allow bicycle use in backcountry within the Memorial;
- Whether to authorize recreation events and limitations of group size.

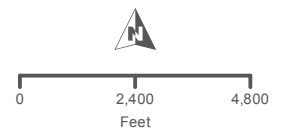
Some decisions may be required to be made by the NPS Regional Director, or through additional mandated rulemaking procedures. The level of decisions will be determined by the actions outlined through the EIS process. If applicable, Special Regulations, including 36 CFR §4.30, regarding the authorization of bicycle use in undeveloped areas of the Memorial, may be pursued by the NPS after a formal Record of Decision is signed.



LEGEND

- | | | | |
|----------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Proposed Route | National Forest System Trail | Mount Rushmore National Memorial | Recreation Sites |
| US Highways | State Trail | | Campground |
| State Highways | FS Motorized Vehicle Trails | Forest Plan Management Areas | Picnic Site |
| Local Roads | FS Motorized Vehicle Roads | Black Elk Wilderness | Trailhead |
| | | General National Forest | |
| | | Private / Other | |
| | | Norbeck Wildlife Preserve Boundary | |

DATA SOURCE: (USFS, NPS, Pennington County, SDDOT)



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